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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 001030

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [MCAP](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [RP](#) [MASS](#)
SUBJECT: PHILIPPINE MILITARY CONDUCTS STRIKE AGAINST
TERRORIST CAMP

REF: MANILA 919

Classified By: Amb. Kristie A. Kenney, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: In the early morning hours of April 30, the Armed Forces of the Philippines launched an artillery strike against a terrorist redoubt on the island of Jolo and followed up with a ground assault. Information on the success of the operation against the terrorist groups Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah is still trickling in from the camp, located in difficult jungle terrain on the mountainous island. The Armed Forces Chief of Staff told the Ambassador he was pleased with the operation and initial reports from troops on the scene were very positive. The officer in charge of the attack, Marine Brigadier General Juancho Sabban, characterized the operation as "intelligence-driven" and dismissed the possibility of collateral damage, stressing the isolated nature of the camp, away from any population center. While media reported allegations that a nearby Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) camp had been shelled, the Philippine military said the camp was untouched and emphasized the operation was not against the MNLF, which signed a peace deal in 1996. The operation came just two months after Sabban took command of joint military forces on Jolo island as part of a shift in Philippine troops in the Sulu Archipelago, in which the Philippine Navy and Marines now have primary responsibility for the area and are combining soft and hard power to counter terrorist influence (reftel). Post will continue to monitor the results of the strike. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Approximately 300 Philippine Marines and soldiers conducted a combined artillery and ground assault against significant terrorist figures from the Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah groups in a camp on Jolo island just after midnight on April 30. The attack against the camp lasted seven hours and was significant because previous assaults on the location, most recently on January 29, had failed due to difficult terrain and an early warning network of informants based around the camp. Located high on the slope of a mountain only eight kilometers from Jolo City, for almost two years the camp had been a refuge for several of the top Abu Sayyaf leaders, such as Abdullah Sahiron, and key Jemaah Islamiyah terrorists operating in the Philippines, including Bali bomber Umar Patek. In addition to the terrorist leadership, scores of their security personnel frequented the camp, suspected of being the site of a bomb-making facility.

13. (C) Definitive results of the strike are as yet unknown, but Philippine forces are canvassing the area to assess

terrorist casualties and damage to the camp's infrastructure.

Philippine Armed Forces Chief of Staff Hermogenes Esperon told the Ambassador that he was pleased with the operation and that initial reports were positive. Post will continue to monitor and report on the investigation and events surrounding the strike.

¶4. (C) In a press release, Marine Brigadier General Sabban stated the offensive was aimed at "apprehending, neutralizing, and bringing to justice the remaining leaders and members of the Abu Sayyaf, as well as the Jemaah Islamiyah bombers, who forged alliances with the former in the name of terrorism and violence." Sabban stressed that the initial strike and follow up pursuit operations against Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah members were being carried out with complete regard for the safety of innocent civilians and their property, but were necessary as "they were planning something big because of the unusual convergence of their leaders. This was a preemptive strike."

¶5. (C) Philippine forces have been careful to communicate that the operation was against terrorist targets, not the MNLF. According to Sabban, MNLF fighters in the area engaged Philippine troops with small arms and mortar fire when the operation commenced, but stopped when informed by the military that the assault was against Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah elements. Sabban underscored the cooperation his troops enjoy with the MNLF in the area and that the military respects and strictly adheres to the provisions of the peace agreement between the Philippine government and the MNLF.

¶6. (C) As Philippine troops continue to press the fight against terrorist groups on Jolo island, Sabban emphasized

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that the target groups cannot be given the chance to regroup and direct further attacks against the local population. "Swift and decisive military movement is necessary," he said. At the same time, under Sabban's leadership, Philippine military personnel are supporting infrastructure development and implementing humanitarian assistance programs on the island to pave the path for future peace and stability.

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KENNEY